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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT AGREES CO-CHAIRS SHOULD DELIVER STRONG
MESSAGE TO TIGERS

REF: COLOMBO 471

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: President Rajapaksa agreed that Co-Chair Chiefs of Mission (minus the US) should travel to Kilinocchi to deliver message to Tigers that they need to engage seriously in Geneva talks, give up violence, and broaden Geneva agenda beyond the ceasefire agreement (CFA). Co-Chairs will ask to see Tiger head Prabhakaran, realizing they will probably get a lower-level meeting. Co-Chairs will issue "pre-statement" before their visit to minimize inevitable Tiger attempts to spin fact of meeting as conferring legitimacy. EU reps will make it clear to Tigers that any backsliding will lead to a terrorist listing. President wants to engage the Tigers on development issues and invite them to join the democratic process. He appears to be leaning against calling a general election. END SUMMARY

12. (U) Co-Chair Chiefs of Mission (COM's) lunched with President Rajapaksa April 5. Co-Chairs were represented by Ambassador Lunstead, EC Ambassador Wilson, Netherlands Ambassador van Dijk, Japanese DCM Karube and Norwegian DCM Laegreid. GSL side consisted of President Rajapaksa, Foreign Secretary Palihakkara, Defense Secretary Gotabaya Rajapaksa,

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President's Secretary Lalith Weeratunga, Finance Secretary Jayasundera, new Peace Secretariat (SCOPP) head Palitha Kohona, and former SCOPP head John Guneratne.

New Election Unlikely

13. (C) COM's congratulated Rajapaksa on his party's victory in the recent local government elections. President said that the victory was welcome, and that many in his party were pressing him to dissolve Parliament and call a general

election. He was leaning against that, however. For one thing, the JVP might well decide to run with the President's party, not separately. Even if the JVP seats were reduced, they could still be a threat to the government because of their popular base.

Moving to Substance at Geneva

14. (C) Ambassador Lunstead asked how the Government was preparing for the next round of Geneva talks. Rajapaksa said it was useless to just talk about the ceasefire agreement. They needed to move on to substance, not have a perpetual debate about ceasefire violations. Ambassador asked how the Government was meeting its commitments at the first round of talks. The President said that the Army was controlling the "other armed groups"--the only incidents had come from the side of the LTTE, like the March 25 sinking of the Sri Lanka Navy's Dvora attack craft. The armed groups were not operating in government areas. If they were operating in "uncleared" (i.e., LTTE-controlled) areas, then the LTTE should let the Sri Lankan police and military enter those areas to find them.

15. (C) The President continued that he wanted to find out what the LTTE wanted and then move forward. Sri Lanka already has a Provincial Council system. Why couldn't the Tigers run for election under the Provincial Council system? If they won--and he really did not care how they won--they would have the offices and the funds that went with them. This would give them control over police, education, highways, etc. They could then work on a final settlement. The President could give funding to them without upsetting his Southern base. "I will talk to the JVP and JHU and

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convince them to agree," he said. Already the JHU has accepted the concept of an Indian-style system for Sri Lanka.

16. (C) Rajapaksa said he believed the LTTE was comfortable with the present situation, where they were able to collect funds and smuggle in arms. They may go for three or four rounds in Geneva, he said, and then attack and try to capture Jaffna. "I need to finish this in six months," he continued. "Any government starts to become unpopular as soon as it assumes power. I need to keep the (Southern) people on board."

17. (C) Ambassador suggested that the Provincial Council idea seemed reasonable in the abstract, but that the long history of broken promises in Sri Lanka would make the Tigers reluctant to agree to such an idea. The discussions then turned to what the GSL might do to build an atmosphere of confidence with the Tigers. Co-Chairs suggested that GSL might publicly underline its commitment to fulfilling its Geneva promises, like controlling armed groups, rather than giving excuses for why they were difficult to carry out. The President agreed with this approach.

18. (C) Ambassador then said that the Co-Chair Chiefs of Mission, minus the US, proposed to travel to Kilinochchi before the April 19-21 second round of talks in Geneva to deliver a message to the Tigers about the need to give up violence, participate genuinely in the Geneva process, and move the discussion beyond the Ceasefire Agreement. Ambassador van Dijk added that the EU reps would tell the Tigers that the EU had agreed that the LTTE was a terrorist organization which deserved to be listed. However, the listing was being held in abeyance as long as the Tigers engaged substantively in the peace process and did not commit terrorist acts. If they did not meet these criteria, listing would be "imminent." (Note: EU reps had earlier suggested this visit to Foreign Secretary Palihakkara, who had strongly objected, believing the Tigers would spin it to confer legitimacy on themselves. Pali agreed, however, to refer the matter to the President, which led to the lunch.) COM's also

said that they would try to prevent a Tiger spin exercise by issuing a statement before their trip stating that their visit was to convey their concern about the peace process and the need for the Tigers to engage and avoid violence.

¶9. (C) The President at first said that delivering a strong message to the Tigers was a good idea, but if the Chiefs of Mission were to travel, they should meet Prabhakaran himself--just as they met the President in Colombo. (Comment: This would have been a deal breaker, as Prabhakaran would almost certainly not meet the envoys.) Ambassador Lunstead noted that if they did meet Prabhakaran, the Tigers would spin it as "Ambassadors call on Tamil Head of State." In fact, the GSL had objected on that precise ground when then-EU Foreign Affairs Commissioner Chris Patten met Prabhakaran in 2003. The President laughed and said, "You are right, If you had come in and said the Co-Chairs wanted to meet Prabhakaran, we probably would have objected to that." After considerable additional discussion, he gave his blessing to the proposal, and offered up helicopter transport for the COM's. The Co-Chairs would ask for a Prabhakaran meeting, knowing full well they would likely get a lower level.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: The President made it clear that, despite many analysts' projections, he did not intend to use his local elections victory to push the JVP too strongly. He believes that he needs to avoid a total break with them in order to keep public support for the peace process. His desire to move the Geneva talks beyond a catalog of ceasefire

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violations into substantive discussions is understandable and laudable. The problem is that he does not have a plan on how to get there and he does not seem to understand the depth of Tiger resentment and suspicion, and the need to take dramatic steps to overcome that suspicion. His decision to approve the Co-Chair visit to Kilinocchi--over the objections of some in his bureaucracy--shows that he is willing to think through these questions and to take firm decisions.
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